

Report on the Southeast Asian NGO Meeting

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by: Anne K. Bernard
IDRC/Ottawa



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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present the results of an Education Programme-funded meeting in Singapore (May 28-31, 1984) intended to explore the potential of nongovernment organizations (NGO's) as an additional research constituency for IDRC funding. Specifically, the meeting focussed on the characteristics of NGOs in terms of the extent and nature of their involvement with research; their strength and stability as development agencies and their viability as grant recipients; and areas of possible collaboration between them and IDRC (the Education Programme in particular but the Division and the Centre more generally).

The most immediate audiences for this report are three: the Education Programme and through it, the Division; the NGO meeting participants; and the Board of Governors of IDRC. From the Programme's perspective, the stimulus for this meeting was a growing recognition that, in Asia at least, very few new or challenging research questions concerning education were being brought forward to the Centre from ministries, national policy research institutions or major urban universities. From visits to the region by both Ottawa and regional staff, two possible reasons for this situation were suggested: one, that there are already sufficient funds available locally to support the majority of serious research proposals; and two, that to a large degree the problem as perceived by regional educators is not so much the need for new knowledge about the education system and its deficiencies and potentials but the lack of political will and structural flexibility necessary to act on knowledge currently at hand.

A third problem in terms of Centre-funding, of course, might be that the Programme has not been sensitive or creative enough in its approach to the region, in identifying a wider variety of people and using different funding strategies within the traditional institutions, and in establishing relations with a wider variety of organizations overall. The former is an issue we are just beginning to address in discussions with researchers and policy-makers in ministries as they bring forward suggestions for future work. The latter question, that of identifying and developing relations with new recipient institutions, is also being explored now, in terms of proposals from non-metropolitan universities and teachers' colleges. It was also the basis for this recent meeting with Southeast Asian NGO's.

The rationale for the Programme looking toward these less traditional research institutions is fairly straightforward. These institutions have the potential, given their particular vantage points vis-à-vis their countries' formal and nonformal education systems, their diverse audiences within various learning communities, and the varied academic and experimental backgrounds of their staffs, of seeing education problems through different eyes, of asking research questions that will challenge previously untried assumptions as to how and for whom education can best be organized, and of experimenting with alternative and perhaps more effective research designs and methodologies. The intention of the Programme is not to look to these institutions as replacements for those with which we have collaborated quite productively in the past and with which we intend to continue to work. Rather, the intention in general over the next few years, and specifically in the case of this meeting, is to seek an indication of the feasibility and usefulness of encouraging research initiatives within alternative institutions such as NGO's.

The NGO's that participated in the Singapore meeting also brought their own concerns: how and to what extent can funding support from IDRC effectively facilitate their research activities, and what are the possible negative consequences of such collaboration. Ten NGO's were represented at the meeting from four countries: Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. In addition, one South Asian NGO was represented, allowing for linkages between the two regions. Also participating in a participant-observer role were a Canadian professor of development economics currently working in Indonesia with a number of NGO's, and two field-staff officers of CUSO - a Canadian NGO with extensive experience in working with NGO'S throughout the region. (A complete participant list is attached).

The particular mix of NGO representation at the meeting turned out to be a very useful one. The different perspectives of the discussion drew out a wide range of issues with respect to the diverse nature of NGO's and their work and to the varying potential of NGO-IDRC collaboration given these different NGO styles and capacities. They also provided participants a stimulating, hopefully productive, learning experience. Certainly contacts were made among the participants that would likely not have occurred otherwise.

From each of the countries, one NGO reflected what might be considered a conventional, ideologically liberal (but not

radical) approach, one ready to deal with government on a need-to-collaborate basis and fairly well-connected with the outside donor and professional world. A second represented the university-NGO connection, if not in terms of current work at least insofar as joint projects were actively being negotiated. Ideologically, this type of NGO tended to reflect a somewhat more radical viewpoint. The final NGO type, also fairly radical, was also by choice more isolated from most mainstream development bodies in terms both of financing and programme implementation. These differences in working styles and philosophies were also somewhat consistent with differences in size and organizational stability, with the conventional NGO's being rather larger and blessed with more stability of funding and staffing than the others.

But all the NGO's at the meeting were comparable in at least two respects. They all worked directly and exclusively on development issues ("development" as defined in IDRC's sense), and all were of a level or type variously referred to as "1st World", "intermediary" or "secondary". Distinguished from those labelled as "primary" or "3rd World" and which work very much on specific and concrete action projects at the level of the immediate community (most often, in fact, growing spontaneously out of their particular environment), the secondary NGO's tend overall to be larger, more stable and more outward looking both collegially, towards the wider development community, and substantively, towards more interactive and broadly-focussed issues such as economic and political power distribution, rural-urban relationships and social change. These are the NGO's that often serve an interlocutory function, facilitating co-operative activities among the smaller NGO's and between "first" world groups, such as donors (whether it be from the North or from the urban elite of the developing country itself), and the primary NGO's (peasant or farmer's associations and community groups, for example). It is these secondary NGO's that are philosophically committed to the idea of dissemination and linkage, and structurally more able to do both. By transmitting ideas, lessons and information about development theory and practice from bottom to top and vice-versa, these NGO's often help to improve the chances that the development activities initiated at any level in the society will be more comprehensive and sustained. The knowledge on which they are based is likely to be more accurate and more reflective of both the practical realities of specific communities as well as of analyses derived from the experiences of a wider variety of case studies.

These are the NGO's with which IDRC is most likely to be able to work effectively (and are the focus of this report) since they tend to have the expertise, experience and confidence to negotiate on an equal footing with international donors while at the same time retaining the capacity to interact collegially with grassroots groups. In this way, secondary NGO's are often able to serve as a research "arm" to the primary groups either directly through joint research projects or indirectly by providing resources such as consultants and funding.

Non-Governmental (Development) Organizatins: An Attempt at Definition

While universities and ministries may be described in fairly similar terms the world over, the same cannot be said of NGO's. In structure, function, ideology and origin, NGO's constitute a set of organizations that are most accurately defined by their diversity. They are perhaps most simply defined by what they are not. As the name implies, NGO's are first and foremost not part of the government system; in terms both of financing and decision-making, they consider their independence from the national power structure to be critical. Although some may accept (or even request) government funding for specific activities or core support, and some may work on projects in co-operation with government agencies or departments, they prefer to maintain as much control as possible over such funds and activities within the framework of their own development philosophies. Probably the majority of NGO's, however--particularly the smaller ones operating in politically hostile environments--operate without reference to the resources a government might offer and often with little if any effort to co-ordinate activities with government. Some, in fact, would define themselves as working directly in opposition to the status quo, not in any necessarily violent way but in the sense of trying seriously to restructure the system from the bottom up.

NGO's are for the most part non-profit, at least insofar as dividends or capital gains are concerned. Relatively few of the NGO's currently in operation in the developing countries (obviously in the tens of thousands) could in fact be characterized as having an income regular enough to ensure even their continued maintenance. Resources that are accrued in excess of this level appear most often to go toward extending activities or providing a modicum of self-sufficiency through the hiring of more full-time staff.

Structurally, NGO's tend to be fairly simple: few permanent staff encumbered by relatively little bureaucracy. While some NGO's have a recognizable identity, complete with offices, equipment, support staff and titled leadership, others are little more than 2-3 person operations, located perhaps in someone's home but in essence working directly "in the field". And even in the bigger NGO's, staff members tend to wear a number of administrative and programmatic hats, responsible for several aspects of both the maintenance and operational functions of the organization, e.g. fund raising, policy-making, planning, training and networking.

Not surprisingly then, fluidity of staff appears to be a major characteristic of NGO's, and presents as well a major complicating factor in the attempt to define NGO's as institutions that are consistent with IDRC's usual use of that term, i.e. stable entities with a life beyond their membership, which can undertake responsibility for a potentially quite complex research project and with skills and potential capable of being enhanced through his process. NGO staff tend to include a range of people from those working full-time but often on a short-term, per project basis, through those working part-time but on a somewhat more permanent basis, to those volunteers who come and go as their own or the organization's needs and interests warrant. Unfortunately, while the administrative "red-tape" demands on most NGO's may be relatively limited, so too, given this fluidity of the workforce, is the availability of consistent, on-hand expertise in areas such as project management, budgetting, planning and evaluation as well as in the substantive skills required by its programme of work.

Also, with regard to staffing, NGO's, more typically than traditional institutions, are definable in terms of charismatic, personal leadership, a leadership on the basis of which many such groups are made or destroyed. Unlike universities or ministries, NGO's are frequently the creation of a few people who have recognized a development need and have been able to exercise enough organizational skill and generate enough philosophical enthusiasm to begin and maintain a coherent, systematic group in pursuit of specific goals. Problems arise for many such NGO's, however, when this first generation of leaders leaves. Because few NGO's have the time, money, in-house expertise or even the interest to undertake consistent staff development activities, there are frequently no obvious replacements for these leaders. But professionalization can

be a double-edged sword for an NGO, and often many of those staff members who might have acquired useful programmatic or leadership skills through more experience leave the NGO early, either for more lucrative or professionally secure positions with more established organizations (the UN system in Asia being a principal beneficiary of much NGO talent) or sometimes to start their own groups. Many NGO's, then, must face a continuing threat of becoming moribund as creative staff leave, of disappearing altogether, or of becoming little more than an informal, inactive network of individuals.

While NGO's might be characterized as simple in their organizational structure, the same is certainly not the case in terms of their functions. They typically have mandates (goals and programmes) that are complex and ambitious beyond what their observed structures might suggest. They seek variously to bring about new agricultural, small enterprise or co-operative systems; to create an interest in and skills for participation by marginal groups in the wider social, economic and political life of the country; to provide social services such as health care, housing, and adult and childhood education; to promote networking within the NGO community and between NGO's and government; and to stimulate policy and action alternatives on the part of governments, donors and the general community on issues ranging from landownership to environmental quality. Many NGO's engage in more than one of these activities at a time, and although their overall goals may remain constant, the specific projects undertaken to reach these goals tend often to be short-term and sometimes sporadic in application. They also shift in emphasis as demands from clientele, staff interests and skills, and resources change.

In this sense, the functions of NGO's can also be characterized as fairly fluid - to change their programme's scope, content, emphasis or method in response to changes in problems, issues or questions as defined by, or in terms of, the intended participants in those programmes. Again, unlike traditional institutions such as ministries or universities, NGO's tend to persist only to the extent that they are seen by their community and by their funders as serving a useful purpose. Few have the benefit of support simply because society deems they should exist. Thus, while in general NGO activities can be described as "development through action", the specifics of those actions are certainly not the same from one NGO to the next, nor are

they necessarily the same for the same NGO over time or across the several different recipients any one NGO might currently be serving.

Development is itself a difficult concept to define, even in academic terms. It becomes a more difficult concept to interpret consistently when attempts are made to operationalize it at the level of local community problems. NGO's need to be fairly quick, but also accurate, in establishing what a relevant training, participatory research or agricultural programme might be in a given community, and how best to implement it. Most NGO's do operate within a certain general framework of activities (training peasants to organize and then to collect and analyze data on local conditions in a systematic, politically conscious way was an example from one NGO at the meeting), but the actual details of the activities will vary appreciably as new or differently defined problems are identified, as tentative solutions are tried or as initial strategies are dropped or modified. Some NGO's simply expand their mandate as new issues present themselves, seeking new funds and adding new staff as appropriate and possible and ending up often with agendas that can include activities from survey research to consumer education. While this kind of flexibility probably contributes to the overall utility of NGO work, it also leads to some degree of confusion as each tries to sort out the logistics and resource requirements of that work (and as outsiders try in turn to understand and categorize it).

Quite clearly, these various structural and functional characteristics of the NGO's have implications for their fundability from IDRC's perspective. Their distance from government, for example, suggests a concomitant reduction in the potential of any research they do having policy or programmatic impact, at least at the national level. Inconsistent or inadequate core funding implies a level of institutional instability that might put into doubt the likelihood of funded research projects being completed. Under-trained, over-extended or overly-mobile NGO staff would suggest the possibility of frequent changes in priorities and skills, and imply in turn that extensive project development and monitoring work would be needed in order to help ensure the viability and implementation of projects.

More will be said about these characteristics as constraints to funding later in the report. Generally speaking the concerns they raise are probably unresolvable unless one

were to change the very nature of NGO's. But these concerns can perhaps be ameliorated by considering other characteristics of NGO's that often reduce the risks involved in their support and at the same time make those risks worth taking. NGO's, as a general class of development agencies, do have a number of important strengths. They work, as they say, "on the ground". Their focus is one that explicitly, directly and fairly singularly concentrates on the principal victims of underdevelopment, the rural poor. It is a focus that is consistent with most current theories of development which conclude that the "trickle down" effect of so-called development programmes and policies oriented toward the middle and upper income groups are not working, but are simply making wider the gap between the haves and have-nots and between the city and the farm. While the secondary NGO's, by definition, occupy a position straddling these two worlds, in principle at least, the initiative for and the ultimate beneficiary of in their programmes is the poor. Even where these NGO's undertake projects at the request of, or in collaboration with, governments and universities, the NGO's are typically seen (and see themselves) as the side really representing the concerns of those groups that have no effective voice of their own.

Because they exist by being effective, NGO's more than the established institutions usually develop their action (and research) projects with specific end-users and a specific problem or issue in mind. Their concern is more typically with the product of development activities, with direct and fairly immediate application of results, rather than with the purity of the process per se or with institutional maintenance.

One frequently detects among NGO workers an impatience with suggestions, that their style of work might somehow be made "neater", more internally consistent or theoretically coherent. Change itself, and not the application of a particular theory of change or an analysis of how or why change occurs, is the principal issue in most NGO work, an attitude that has obvious implications when it comes to the question of how research fits into their agenda.

The working styles of most development NGO's attempt to be consistent with their goals. They emphasize, with varying degrees of success, of course, the participation and education of the poor, encouraging and training members of marginal groups to be aware of, and be able to use to their best advantage, those elements of the larger socio-economic

and political systems that directly influence their lives. And because NGO's tend to be relatively unfettered by bureaucracy, because they often include a mix of staff experiences and skills, and because they are ready to select methods because they work rather than because they are traditional, their approaches to dissemination, training and research can often be innovative and eclectic.

A further strength of NGO's is often perceived as a negative feature: the fact that limited funds preclude their maintaining large permanent staffs. One apparent benefit of this situation, however, is that because most NGO's have come to consider staffing changes as a normal feature of the organization, many in turn are able to use it very productively as a means of enhancing programme flexibility. No NGO can expect to maintain a stock of in-house expertise adequate to meet its typically multiple-task agendas. Programme relevance might in fact become threatened to the extent that activities were undertaken simply to suit the interests of their staff. Economic necessity creates for NGO's, then, a situation in which they have continually to reach out for personnel resources beyond their insitutional parameters and, by so doing, often extend those parameters to encompass a surprisingly large and diverse set of skills. Short-term "consultants" and per-project "technical assistants" are not aberrations for an NGO as they might be for a university or ministry; they are a normal staffing characteristic. When programmes need to change to suit the communities being served, so too can the staff, and while this condition results in stresses for management (continually having to locate appropriate and available resource persons and the funds to pay them), it also means that NGO's are often able successfully to undertake projects that at first glance would appear beyond their institutional capacity.

This potential for making instability in staffing an asset in terms of strengthening programme flexibility is very much related to the broader characteristic of NGO's: their tendency to function quite consciously as part of networks involving both institutional and professional relationships. Few NGO's have the institutional capacity or the inclination to operate as independent islands of activity, isolated from other agencies or from the field. Instead, NGO's acquire considerable strength and impact through numbers. They are thus provided both with reservoirs of talent and resources and with a multiplicity of entry points to academic and policy circles. As described by one Thai NGO director, while any single NGO may inflict only

flea-bites (well-targetted though these may be) on the nation's development problems, as a class of organization and to the extent they work collectively, their efforts become cumulative and the overall results potentially significant. "One giant itch", in the words of one.

Particularly in the case of secondary NGO's, these network linkages typically involve a mixed bag of partners: other secondary NGO's (local and international), university and government departments (or selected individuals therein), primary or "grassroots" groups and professional associations. Linkages are mixed, too, in terms of their formality and their purpose. Some are through formal projects, staff secondments, and intra-network training, and meetings or seminars, but probably most are through on-going but informal associations. Networks are often unstable, fluctuating in terms of membership and the strength and nature of their bonds largely on the basis of perceived advantages to participants but also influenced by the prevailing political climate and the ideology of the particular NGO members. The issue of linkages itself appears as a continuingly important theme in discussions with and debates among NGO's: how and with whom collaboration should be undertaken, and how it should be maintained them, so as to enhance the quality, utility and scope of the work while at the same time avoiding co-optation or the creation of dependencies--of the NGO on its donors or the government, for example, or of primary organizations on their more established secondary-level colleagues.

NGO's and Research

NGO's are primarily action-oriented agencies. Most typically, they are involved with issues of development as they relate to agriculture, health or education--not so much to understand the issues better, but to work through them to bring about change. They have tended, on the whole, to exhibit relatively little inclination towards, time for, or skills in the kinds of purposive data collection and reflective analysis that would constitute "research" per se. There appear certainly to be very few NGO's with research as a principal activity, unless one were to include those groups engaged in "participatory research" (PR) of some form (but here, as will be discussed later, the line often becomes blurred between PR as a means to an end, and thus as research, and PR as an end in itself, as a form of adult or community education).

Given this rather general statement, however, it was also apparent at the Singapore meeting that increasing numbers of NGO's are becoming aware both of the need for more and better (i.e., more accurate and relevant) research and of the particular contributions that they themselves can make to this process. And more and more, NGO's are building at least some components of the research cycle into their programmes: data collection, analysis, synthesis, dissemination or the training of village-level groups in simple methodologies. All those participating in the Singapore meeting considered themselves to be engaged in research to some degree, several on a more or less full-time basis but most having research as one of a variety of programme activities (albeit usually not the most important one).

Overall, the definition of research among NGO's was action-oriented: a process of clarifying and acting on actual problems of the poor through the collection and analysis of community-based data and for the purpose of advancing development from the bottom up.

On the specifics of NGO-based research, however, the range appears to be wide, and as to why research is undertaken in the first place, reasons vary from NGO to NGO and within any one NGO overtime. Studies are undertaken on occasion because of individual staff interest. More often these are done because the focus, content or methodologies of the NGO's action programmes require evaluation and better information; because contract-research funding is made available; because of a recognition that the research process is in itself an effective means of stimulating community education or politicization; because there is a need to illustrate for government policy-makers the realities of poverty or to advocate on behalf of the poor better strategies for development; because new ideas need to be generated as to what, in the first place, these better strategies might be; and because new technologies intended to help the poor need to be tested for relevance and safety. Very little NGO research, it appears, is undertaken for its own sake, to legitimize a policy already adopted, to extend theory, or to advance the professional status of the researcher. Consistent with other NGO characteristics, its research is typically applied, problem-oriented and specific to the context of time and place.

The designs and methodologies of NGO research are consistent with their purposes. Research designs tend to be fluid, beginning often with a fairly broad statement of the problem and only gradually working towards an operational (and therefore researchable) definition of the questions or issues as the data are collected and analyzed. One result of this process is that studies can often shift in mid-stream, taking quite a new focus or direction as new information leads to new perspectives and perceptions.

The methodologies of much NGO research play a contributing role in this process of design modification. Even those NGO's that do fairly traditional research on a full-time basis tend to be eclectic in the variety of techniques used (surveys, questionnaires, experiments, observation, documentary analyses), an eclecticism that can often lead to the generation of interesting kinds of information but which also makes for a research process that does not necessarily follow expected directions. Those NGO's that do research more sporadically, and as an adjunct to their action programmes, occasionally also employ a variety of traditional methods but much more often tend to an approach that emphasizes action and/or participatory methods. For most of this NGO research, the concern is more with answering the question or solving the problem, and doing so in collaboration with the community, than with methodological purity or consistency in an academic sense. This is not to suggest in any way that such research is necessarily faulty--that it does not illuminate effectively or accurately the situation it seeks to clarify. Rather it is to suggest that the standards used in judging the veracity or merit of such research cannot be the same as those that are applied to research conducted within the traditional, positivistic model because the assumptions and goals underlying it are typically not the same.

One issue regarding NGO research that is of concern, however, certainly from IDRC's perspective, is the fact that very many NGO's engage in a style of research referred to generally as "participatory" but which frequently obscures, and sometimes denies as relevant, the distinction between research and education. Admittedly, the distinction is a difficult one to maintain, and perhaps only matters to an agency like IDRC committed to funding research rather than training activities. But it is a distinction that can perhaps most usefully be made in terms of the intended use of the results of the activity. If done well, participatory research (PR) is research in that it involves the articulation of a research question, the operationalization

of that question in terms of the types of data needed to answer it, the collection and analysis of those data, and the drawing (and application) of conclusions and recommendations. The characteristics of PR as such are that the people who have the problem are actively involved as participants in each of these steps, that the process tends to be iterative (new data causing reformulations of the question and new questions being generated from the attempts to apply and assess the recommended actions) and the belief that there is as much, if not more, value in the research process itself as in any single "answer".

To the extent that this research process, however, focusses only on the immediate problems of that one set of participants, the process is more accurately defined as "education". It becomes "research" to the extent that the participants undertake to disseminate or extend their learning beyond the immediate community; to draw conclusions not simply in terms of the particular case, but in such a way as to generate ideas or applications in other settings; and to analyze the data in terms of general principles and not merely as isolated details. PR, as research, should still of course be educative for those doing it, but it needs also to be educative in this wider sense. And to the extent that it is, PR is doubly valuable as a form of applied research: it produces change (impact) at the point of its implementation and it provides as well the potential for change elsewhere as other researchers and practitioners consider its results in light of their own situations. The dilemma for IDRC in considering proposals using a participatory research design will be in determining whether the line between education and research has been adequately crossed, and if not, how far to go, legitimately, in encouraging its authors to extend their design for a purpose they may not consider appropriate or feasible.

Constraints and Strengths in NGO Research

Considerable attention was given during the meeting to the problems NGO's face in initiating and doing research, but also to their strengths--particularly as compared to the research capacities and styles of the two major research institutions, governments and universities.

As has already been suggested earlier in the report, several factors militate against NGO's active involvement in research. Most obvious, perhaps, is the scarcity of resources. In terms of money, there is relatively little funding available for research in general in the developing

countries, and what monies are available tend to go to the larger, more established institutions and for projects easily recognized as traditional research. NGO's are much more rarely recipients. They are typically not well known to foreign donors, and domestically they are often suspect, thought to be engaging in activities that are at best irrelevant and at worst subversive. Furthermore, only a few are recognized as competent to do research. The majority are perceived as action agencies more likely to become involved with research simply because funds are available rather than out of serious commitment. Research initiatives that are undertaken by action NGO's tend to be viewed rather sceptically in terms of the likely quality and impact of the work.

The fault, of course, is not all on one side. NGO's themselves acknowledge that they have not taken enough care to establish contacts with foreign and local research donors--in part out of a desire to maintain their ideological independence and in part due to an inadequate realization of the cost of research in terms of the expenses of fieldwork, background documents, materials and staff time (salary). Many of these are resources that universities or government research units take for granted as part of the institution; they are not resources many NGO's would regularly have "on-hand". For many NGO's there is perhaps, too, for many NGO's the very real question of whether the agency should be getting into research in the first place and thus whether any time and energy expended on seeking outside funds should be directed toward action rather than research donors.

There is also a scarcity in terms of trained personnel. While some NGO staff have come to the organization with research training or experience, such people are rare and usually only within secondary-level NGO's. Most typically even there, though, NGO personnel come as teachers, agricultural extension workers, community activists and, on occasion, as farmers or village leaders. These staff members very frequently have excellent skills in designing and implementing action programmes. They are often very committed to the need for grassroots development. Many recognize the need for research that takes as its point of departure development problems at this level. Unfortunately, few have the skills to design or do such research effectively, and there are not many opportunities or resources available for their training.

In addition to the inadequacies of resources for research, NGO's are constrained, too, in terms of their ability to clear the various bureaucratic hurdles that often stand in the way of field research. Because of their somewhat studied independence from centres of power in their respective countries, and the subsequent suspicion or ignorance of them on the part of these centres, it is more often difficult for NGO's to receive the necessary clearances for receiving foreign funds, for doing field-based data collection (in schools, or in sensitive "security" areas, for example) or for having access to national policy or statistical documents than is the case for the higher profile institutions.

Rather ironically, NGO's are also somewhat constrained in doing research by their reputation for bringing about useful change at the village level through their action programmes. Peasants and farmers do not tend to be sympathetic to the time needed to collect and analyze data that are to some extent independent of action to gather and reflect on information and its possible implications before undertaking remedial activities. While communities and the researchers themselves may well expect university or government research teams to come and talk about problems and then to leave without subsequent action (or even feedback), the same is not the case for NGO researchers. Both the community and the NGO expect more of NGO personnel, and these expectations, it seems, place considerable pressure on NGO researchers as they attempt to maintain their projects as recognizable and relatively coherent research activities and to develop them to at least some level of satisfactory analysis (before introducing new practices based only on partial data).

Related to this external pressure for action is the equally if not stronger internal competition for staff time and intellectual energy, a competition based both on their typically paramount concern for promoting change through action and on the frequently heavy work agendas in organizations with few staff who have many tasks (administrator, fund-raiser, teacher, planner, etc.). Research is often a lengthy process, demanding considerable attention to planning, to the organization of data and to fairly reflective analysis--all activities that require one to work for sustained periods alone, without the interruption of administrative tasks and often with only sporadic and ambiguous evidence of "progress". These are not typically conditions consistent with work in an NGO.

A further impediment to NGO-based research is the fact that few have the inclination (or the option), given the dynamic nature of their working environment, to plan long-term agendas for the studies they will undertake, with whom and how. They seem more typically to react to issues identified in the course of community activities, and to develop these into more or less "research" projects as the discussions evolve and, to some degree, if and as appropriate personnel or financial resources present themselves. Even once underway, research agendas can readily shift as the community, the staff or the donor(s) bring into the process their own priorities and interpretations.

From a more substantive point of view, NGO research is often limited by virtue of its relative isolation from the "intellectual mainstream" of development (or education) theory and methodology. Again, due both to the preferred fields of interest and the training of most NGO staff and to limited funds that make it difficult to attend meetings, buy documents and even to correspond efficiently with potential network colleagues, NGO researchers do not have the access to new ideas or fieldwork experiences that counterparts in the other institutions do. NGO proposals tend more frequently, therefore, to be theoretically or methodologically weak, not simply from a donor perspective but in terms of the essential viability, utility and feasibility of the undertaking. And once a NGO study has been done, there are fewer possibilities for peer review as a means of generating comment on the value and the quality of the work. This means, in turn, less feedback for the NGO in the design of future and better studies as well as less chance that others will benefit from their experience.

In looking at the constraints to NGO research, however, it is important to keep in mind that other research agencies also have their drawbacks. NGO's should not then be judged on the basis of an "ideal" that does not exist, but rather as a category of organization that, like other institutions, has weaknesses that need to be taken into account when considering whether--and, more importantly, how--to provide research support. NGO research should also be considered in light of its "comparative advantage" over the other, in a sense competitive, institutions.

On several points, NGO research strengths can be viewed as the flip-side of their weaknesses, lack of funds being the most obvious exception to the case. Lack of research trained personnel, for example, is quite clearly a problem in the design and implementation of research, but NGO's are

frequently without regular staff expertise in much of their work. The result, as described earlier, is that they have learned, as an organizational strategy, to draw on and use on a part-time basis available expertise from elsewhere. Despite the obvious management headaches this system creates, it also allows for an often very effective extension of NGO capacities, and in a way that has the potential for much more creativity and energy in their research than might be the case with more permanent staff.

Research Linkages

The collaboration with perhaps the most potential for comprehensive and effectively done research is that between the NGO and the university, given the particular interests and strengths of each and the fact that many NGO's have good personal relations with university staff through connections with previous student and teacher colleagues. NGO's can provide the sensitivity and connections to development problems as they obtain in and are perceived by the community, while the university team members contribute the experience with theory and methodology. The NGO researchers are more likely to ask the irrelevant or the lateral question; the university researchers may have the expertise necessary to operationalize this question in a way that can be effectively studied. The NGO can provide legitimacy and a "space" for the research through its established, co-operative, relationships with the particular community undergoing the research. Also, through the feedback that an NGO is often able to get from the community as to its sense of the relevance and validity of the final results, the credibility of the research at that level is enhanced. The university connection, through the access it provides to documentary and other channels of scholarly exchange, can help facilitate credibility at that level. The university is also more likely to have productive, equitable relations with the government ministries who might subsequently be encouraged to implement the research results, thus helping to provide credibility with the power structure.

But the relationship between the NGO and the university is not necessarily an easy one, and the specific details of the collaboration need to be built and maintained with care. This is particularly important from the perspective of the NGO staff who can quite quickly become dependent on, and whose purposes can be deflected by, university researchers who are often more articulate as well as more experienced in directing the research process. Given the often

bureaucratically cumbersome and sometimes politically conservative nature of many universities, partnerships between them and the NGO are most typically not with the university as an institution but rather are developed on an informal basis with particular staff members--researchers whose philosophies of development have proven compatible with those of the NGO and who have indicated a full acceptance of the problem-focussed, action-based paradigm used by the NGO in defining the research question. These partnerships are also most effective where the responsibility for the action-research process is fully shared since there is a danger that in this type of relationship the university researchers will do the research, the NGO the action. This is a division of labor that will preclude the effective meshing of perspectives and skills of each institution. It is also a division of labor that is likely to result in the university exercising substantive control while the NGO simply assists with the mechanics of data collection (not identification) and tabulation (not analysis). And finally, care must be taken in ensuring that the primary focus of NGO research, the community and its problems, does not become lost in a shift towards more traditionally academic concerns: methodological purity, professional status or theoretical significance.

The possibilities of research linkages between NGO and government appear to be more limited. Concerns on the part of the NGO about loss of independence or about government interference in programme activities are strong. Legislation such as the Societies Act in Malaysia, and a similar pending proposal in Indonesia, requiring all NGO's to be registered and opening them to the possibility of seizure of materials and arrest on no grounds other than being a threat to "good order", do little to lessen the animosity. Government researchers themselves are seen by the NGO's as fairly inflexible in terms of research style; often unsympathetic to the ideal of community-oriented, participatory research; less able to respond to new directions in the research process or to ask questions and draw conclusions contrary to government policy; and less likely to accept a problem-focus to the research if it implies activities or issues that cut across departmental or ministry lines of authority.

There have been, of course, incidents of effective and very productive co-operative research projects between government and NGOs. Again, as with the universities, these have most typically been informal, personal partnerships between like-minded researchers (often former colleagues). It is a

kind of relationship that tends to work particularly well in Southeast Asia where government bureaucracies are, on the surface, ponderous and hierarchical but, in practice, are often effectively manipulated through interpersonal contacts and informal agreements.

The third area of research linkages is NGO to NGO, most often involving secondary-level groups with primary ones. The relationship here is not unlike that between a larger NGO and a university, although in these cases the partnership is usually at the institutional level and more frequently involves a network of several groups rather than just two. As with the university-NGO connection, care is needed here, too, to ensure that the relationship is genuinely collaborative. As much as possible, the local organization should participate in more than simply the mechanical or action components of the research, although given the very limited exposure of most of their members to anything like development theory or research methods, it is likely that their involvement will remain more at the level of learning the procedures for, rather than initiating, analysis and data collection.

Nevertheless, the potential benefit of this type of collaboration can be significant, particularly in terms of collecting and analyzing data in ways that are immediately relevant to the community and can be applied directly to practice. The secondary NGO is able to bring to the research process relatively more technical expertise than is available to grassroots groups, as well as access to documents, and a forum for the wider dissemination of results (thus lifting the process from simply a community education exercise to research per se). It is often able also to absorb some of the research overhead costs, to act as an intermediary where necessary with any concerned local authorities, and to contribute training expertise and resources for subsequent action programmes--again reinforcing the applied nature of much NGO-based research.

Although clearly there are problems in NGO research associated with the preference for action/participatory methods and problem-focussed designs, just as clearly there are major strengths in the approach. The problems selected for research by NGO's tend to be immediate, concrete and explicitly "people" oriented. While such research less directly serves the needs of theory development, it more directly serves the needs of the communities that are its focus. NGO research tends much more than many other kinds of research to integrate theory with practice, to make both

the attempt to understand the situation and the attempt to improve it part of the same process. In this sense, the research is perhaps closer to IDRC's conception of research "as a tool for development" rather than simply research "as a window on the process of development".

It is a style of research, too, that more accurately reflects the social change process, in that it is non-linear and iterative and makes purposive use of the context of the research. Unlike the more traditional research paradigms favoured in academic and government studies, those used (or attempted) by NGO's tend not to be based on the ideal of a controlled environment uncluttered by intervening or confounding variables. Because the focus of action research is the problem itself, and not a theoretical abstraction of it, whatever the variables or data are that influence or are perceived to influence the character of the problem, these are the factors that are included. This approach makes action and particularly participatory-action research less tidy and more unpredictable than other more structured designs, but then development itself is neither a tidy nor a predictable process.

The conclusions reached by action research tend to be more ambivalent, less "conclusive" than conclusions reached by traditional research, but then very few development "solutions" themselves ever unambiguously or conclusively solve the problem they attempt to address. To the extent that the research is able to illuminate the complexity of socio-economic problems, it is more likely that the remedial actions resulting from it will take more accurately into account the many factors that constrain efforts to change them. The action/participatory research in which many NGO's are engaged is research that very often attempts to achieve this kind of veracity. And insofar as the research is able to incorporate community members as collaborators, the process itself tends to have a mobilizing effect, providing people the information to better understand the dynamics and dimensions of their problems and in many cases the motivation and the confidence to act on their own conclusions.

IDRC Support to NGO-Based Research

There is a certain amount of risk involved in any project funding, both for the recipient tied contractually to the completion of a predefined task over a fixed period within specific budget guidelines, as well as for the Centre, since many of the projects are undertaken within institutions and

within economic, political and research environments that are not always conducive to the work.

Not surprisingly then, there are risks to both sides in Centre support to NGO research, risks which in some ways perhaps are greater than those experienced with larger, more firmly established research institutions but which in other ways are simply different. And as with grants to any institution, those to NGO's will be effective (and the risks subsequently reduced) to the extent that they take into careful account, through the design of the funding mechanism, the particular research interests, strengths, constraints and contexts of those organizations. The issues for both the Centre and the NGO to determine will be whether major problems can be satisfactorily handled and whether any risks are sufficiently counterbalanced by the benefits of the exercise overall. And ultimately, the decision as to whether or not to fund research in an NGO should not be made on the basis of whether as a class of organization NGO's can be funded. Some NGO's will be appropriate recipients, others will not. As with other institutions, the decision will be based on whether the research proposal itself has merit (relevance, feasibility, application potential) and whether the particular NGO proposing it has the commitment and the capacity necessary to do it effectively, allowing for the fact that the Centre for its part has the ability to build in certain support systems if and when it is felt by both sides to be appropriate.

Given this position, however, there are obviously characteristics of NGO's as a class which suggest some common constraints or costs to their doing research with IDRC support. These are issues, then, which will need to be carefully addressed by the Centre and potential NGO recipients when funding is being considered.

Funding Impact

It is clear that almost any amount of donor funding to an NGO is likely to have a significant impact on the entire programme agenda of the organization--on the direction of the overall work, the relative attention given to different project areas, relations with their constituency and the hiring and maintenance of staff. NGO's, whether secondary or primary, are too small and too fragile simply to absorb without effect a sudden inflow of resources, particularly when these resources are earmarked for a specific task. IDRC funding presents an especially delicate situation insofar as its funds are to be used for an activity that is

not likely the major focus of concern to the NGO, i.e., research. There is a danger that the offer of funds to an organization in a continuing battle for existence will be too great a temptation to resist, and that research will be undertaken on the basis of "why not" rather than of "why". This is a danger to IDRC, of course, because the commitment and capacity necessary to complete the piece of research may not be there and the funds will have been wasted. There is a danger, also, however, to the NGO in that such research is likely to be done to the detriment of (or instead of) action programmes that would have been done more effectively and might have contributed in a major way to a community's development. In considering NGO research proposals, then, both sides need to be particularly clear as to why the activity is being initiated and how it fits within the wider work agenda of the NGO.

Eligibility

In one sense, a more basic question for the Centre to address in dealing with the NGO community--one that tends not to arise in the case of ministries or universities--is how individual NGO eligibility will be determined and what factors will be used to determine if the NGO constitutes a legitimate "research institution" as such. Will the organization's agenda need to reflect a certain percentage of research activities or the staff a certain level of research training and experience? Or is it enough that the NGO expresses a committed interest in moving into this new area of work? And how much evidence of institutional "stability" will there need to be? Will it be necessary that the NGO provide evidence of guaranteed core funding, a given number of permanent staff, and an extensive research work record? The question of institutional capacity is not, of course, an unusual one to ask in determining the viability of a proposal, but it is likely to become much more regularly asked, and to be rather harder to answer, in the case of NGO's.

Research Style

In terms of the research question or focus itself and the methodology, NGO proposals are most likely to be developed within an action or participatory research paradigm: problem-based, qualitative, fairly unstructured (evolving) in design and with an explicit attempt to integrate analysis with action. Given this preferred style of research, and coupled with the fact that in many cases the research team will not have had extensive experience in this type of work,

there is likely to be need for a much more activist role by Centre officers, more than usual time and guidance for both project development and monitoring. Care will be needed, on both sides, to ensure that the researchers themselves are clear as to the distinction between reflected action or community education and research; that the latter is what they really want to do; and that the emphasis on research is maintained despite community or philosophical pressures to the contrary. Care, and perhaps some facilitation, will be needed to ensure that the composition of the research team is such as to provide the necessary expertise--whether this can be done from within the existing complement of NGO staff, whether pre-project training is required and whether and how outside resources (individuals, institutions or networks) can be most effectively included. Attention will also be needed at the research dissemination stage to decide how the results can best be shared. Because NGO's do not tend to have ready access to documentary systems, because they do not have the funds or the mechanisms for individual staff travel or for meetings, these are activities that may need to be incorporated on a fairly regular basis in NGO projects to help ensure that potentially very valuable learning experiences are somehow extended and that the research cycle is completed.

There are obviously implications in these activities for Centre staff time and travel budgets. The smaller the NGO and the more tentative its management skills, the more need there will be for basic financial and administrative monitoring in addition to substantive input. If the decision is made that the research has merit, that the results are as likely as any to contribute to a pragmatic understanding of development issues, but that the resources needed to sustain the undertaking are more than IDRC can provide, then a further consideration will be (and may fairly frequently be) whether to move toward a third party funding strategy. There was considerable enthusiasm expressed by CUSO at the Singapore meeting that it perform such a function, for example, and there are apparently several other Canadian NGO's interested in this role. One would assume the existence of equally good if not better local candidates. However, the choice of institution and of project management strategies would need to be worked through carefully with the NGO in order that the arrangement be supportive of its research purpose and capacity building needs, and that it not result in dependency.

Flexibility Required

On several somewhat more administrative matters, there will be a need for greater flexibility on the part of the Centre in responding to NGO requests for support, and it is likely that not all attempts at matching will be successful. The project format itself with its requirement for pre-established objectives, methods, timeline and budget categories presents a problem for research designs that are essentially iterative, i.e. that begin with a fairly broad research question and develop their clarity and objectives over time through interaction with the community, through the collection and analysis of data and through the application and evaluation of results. Much more appropriate, according to many at the meeting, would be a broader "area support" funding strategy, something analagous to programme support but with perhaps less of a thematic focus and more support for core costs.

Proposals are likely, too, to be difficult to process through the Social Sciences Division insofar as they are written from the perspective of a "problem" rather than a "discipline" and by a type of organization that very rarely defines its area of activity in terms of a single topic (agriculture, health, training, etc.). Fairly few proposals may be readily categorizable as education, population or urban policy; most will cross programme lines or fall somewhere between. In some cases, clarification of the research question will help to establish a "home", perhaps, but in many cases it will likely be necessary to undertake projects on a collaborative basis.

There are likely to be more requests from prospective NGO researchers for almost "pre" pre-project meetings, meetings to help identify the research question, as well as to clarify its design and methodology. There will be more requests, too, for some form of sustained documentary support, both for supplying current published materials to NGO researchers and for disseminating their research through the NGO networks.

One particular area of concern to many of the NGO's at the meeting, as an impediment to the possibility of their doing Centre-funded research, was the issue of government clearances and the difficulty NGO's have in obtaining them. For countries like Indonesia, it was strongly suggested that IDRC re-negotiate the country agreement or else allow for umbrella-type grants through which several smaller NGO's could be "cleared" through the offices of one, larger NGO.

In other cases, it may more simply be a matter of adding clauses to the original country agreement exempting NGO's from clearance requirements. The issue of "clearance" for NGO research took on a more philosophical aspect as well at the meeting as several participants recommended that IDRC take on a more explicit advocacy role, arguing on behalf of NGO's and their work with government and actively presenting NGO research to the wider international forum. The extent to which the Centre can or should champion the cause of NGO research, any more than it provides credibility on an incidental level for any institution it supports by virtue of that support, is an open point. Nevertheless, given the rather ideological enthusiasm of NGO's as to the merit of their work, and the recognition on their part as to the vulnerability of that work, it is a request for moral support that appears likely to be a common one among NGO's. Certainly there was a common call at the meeting for building solidarity between the Centre and the NGO community.

Final Comment: NGO's and Education

Although the funding and the impetus for the NGO meeting came from the Education Programme--and the initial objective was to clarify the extent to which NGO's could provide an appropriate constituency for education research funds--it was clear from the meeting that few NGO's are explicitly or solely "education" agents per se. Most, if not all, engage in some form of training (of their own staff, of other NGO's, of the community). Many of their community education and extension programme activities involve them, in effect, in taking up the cause of those pushed out from the formal education system (adults who still do not read, children who have no access to schooling, farmers who need to understand new agricultural technologies but for whom the formal system offers no programme). But their focus is not usually on learning as a process or on education as an established system of organizing this process.

The consequence of this is that relatively few proposals coming from NGO's may be ones that the Education Programme as such can support without incorporating into its definition of education topics such as "processes involved in farmers' decision-making" (i.e., how they manipulate and incorporate new information into their practices) or "communication patterns among grassroots groups" (how they function, what they achieve, how they can be strengthened). These topics could be considered, of course, as forms of social learning, and while stretching the definition of

education in this way may be needed, it may also be an appropriate and useful recognition of the role of learning (education with a small "e") in the development-as-empowerment process. Just as NGO action programmes are serving in many countries as ground-breaking examples for national development programmes, NGO research initiatives and the Centre's efforts to accommodate them may well lead to a new understanding of how research can work as a development tool.

REGIONAL SEMINAR OF NGO'S
MAY 28 - 31, 1984

DR. WILLIE FADERON
International Institute of
Rural Reconstruction (IIRR)
Silang, Cavite
PHILIPPINES
(Tel: 58-26-59)

Ms. EILEEN BELAMIDE
Farmer's Assistance Board
Rm 307, Don Santiago Building
1344 Taft Avenue
Ermita, Metro Manila
PHILIPPINES
(Tel: 58-27-46)

Fr. ANTONIO LEDESMA
Faculty of Agriculture
Xavier University
Cagayan De Oro City
PHILIPPINES 8401
(Tel:)

Mr. M.M. BILLAH
Executive Secretary
Sekretariat Bina Desa/INDHRRA
Jl. Mandala V/12 Cililitan Besar
Jakarta Timur
INDONESIA
(Tel: 582-659)

Dr. HASAN POERBO
Ketua PSLH - ITB
J. Sangkuriang 42
Bandung
INDONESIA
(Tel: 836-09)

Dr. ADI SASONA
Lembaga Studi Pembangunan
Setiabudi 1 Building, 2nd Floor
Block B, 3 - 4
Jl. H.R. Rasuna Said 62
Jakarta 12950
INDONESIA
(Tel: 512-672)

Dr. GEOFFREY HAINSWORTH
Professor
Dept. of Economics
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.
CANADA
(Tel:)

Dr. S. TILAKARATNE
Participatory Institute for
Development Alternatives (PIDA)
32, Gotami Lane
Colombo 8
SRI LANKA
(Tel: 553-191)

Dr. SUPOTE PRASERTSRI
The Rural Friends Association
122/10, Soi 1, Phanurangsi Village
Bankruay, Nonthaburi 11130
THAILAND
(Tel: 422-1202)

Dr. MALEE SUWANA-ADTH
SVITA Foundation
21/53-55 Soi Than Phuying Phahon
Ngarmvongarn Road, Bangkhaen
Bangkok 10900
THAILAND
(Tel: 579-2480-1)

Mr. TANOTHAI SOOKDHIS
Population & Community Development
Association (PDA)
8, Sukhumvit 12
Bangkok 10110
THAILAND
(Tel: 251-0402/3)

Mr. MARTIN KHOR KOK PENG
Consumers Association of Penang
No. 27, Kelawei Road
Pulau Pinang
Penang
MALAYSIA
(Tel: 373-511)

Mr. RICHARD HOLLOWAY
Asia Regional Director
CUSO
30, Jalan Setiarasa
Bukit Damansara
Kuala Lumpur 23-12
MALAYSIA
(Tel: 942-171)

Dr. ZIAD SALIM
Region Director 3
CUSO